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Interactive Literacy Activities

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Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to provide a broad overview of Interactive Literacy Activities (ILAs) and to suggest ways to implement ILAs more effectively. After summarizing the research basis for ILAs, the brief describes what ILAs entail and the ways in which they are being used in family literacy, provides examples of ILA activities with a solid research base, and offers suggestions for designing culturally appropriate ILAs.

The Research Rationale for Interactive Literacy Activities

Interactive Literacy Activities, or ILAs, broadly refer to activities that facilitate interaction between adults and children for the purpose of promoting literacy and language development. The importance of parental involvement in children's literacy and language development is well documented in educational research. For instance, based on a comprehensive analysis of research studies, the National Institute for Literacy (2006) concluded that parental involvement such as reading to children, listening to children read, and teaching specific literacy skills has a large effect on children's reading acquisition.

Emergent literacy skills—that is, the “skills, knowledge, and attitudes” that precede “conventional forms of reading and writing”—depend largely on the opportunities and experiences provided to children in the home environment (Lonigan, 2004, p. 59). For example, substantial research has shown that children who are read to regularly have improved literacy and language outcomes (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995). Furthermore, the home literacy environment is a strong predictor of children's word recognition skills and vocabulary development (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002).

Because oral language and print literacy skills build the foundation for children's later learning, they are central to ensuring school success. These skills are essential for all children, but especially for children who live in poverty and whose parents may have

limited education or literacy skills. For example, children from families of lower socioeconomic status are less likely to have early literacy experiences with school-like materials, often contributing to poor language and early literacy competencies, as measured by standardized tests (Adams, 1990). However, such children also have rich literacy and oral language capacities, such as storytelling and rhyming, that are often not recognized by educators or reflected in test scores (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 2004; Vernon-Feagans, Head-Reeves, & Kainz, 2004).

A study of parental beliefs about emergent literacy found that although parents with lower literacy scores valued literacy and understood the importance of having literacy materials in the home and of adults modeling literacy for children, they had few ideas about specific ways to help their young children develop language and literacy skills (Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991). Thus, family literacy programs play an important role in bridging the gap in early literacy experiences for disadvantaged families.

Given the important influence of home language and literacy activities on literacy development and educational achievement, it is essential to incorporate such activities into family literacy programs. Several studies (e.g., Conrad, 2008; Fitzgerald, et al., 1991) suggest that parents may not know how to help their children learn to read, and also lack confidence in their ability to do so. Additionally, parents and teachers may have differing beliefs about literacy. As a result, educators may need to bridge these differences before parents feel comfortable engaging in language- or literacy-focused activities (Fitzgerald, et al., 1991). Family literacy programs should also involve parents in discussions about literacy, use research-based strate-

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gies for language and literacy instruction, and provide guidance on using these strategies at home, as well as ample opportunities for practice and feedback.

What Are Interactive Literacy Activities?

Interactive literacy activities grew out of the recognition that the home oral language and literacy environment plays a vital role in children's literacy learning. ILAs have also been referred to as Parent-Child Literacy Activities or Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time. However, ILAs do not necessarily require parental participation; caregivers such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, or child care providers may also be involved in ILAs. In sum, ILAs are intended to foster adult-child interactions that encourage children's active participation in reading, writing, and language activities, and in so doing, enhance their language and print literacy development (Jacobs, 2004).

ILAs include a wide array of activities, and also vary depending on the child's age and developmental level. For example, Washington Learning Systems (WLS, 2005) has developed ILAs for two age groups: birth to 3 and preschool. Although the ILA activities are geared toward the child's age, the key principle remains the same: Interactive dialogue between parents and children facilitates comprehension and understanding of literacy conventions and encourages the enjoyment of reading (DeBruin-Parecki, 2007). Thus, enjoyable, reciprocal interactions between caregivers and children are the basis for all ILAs. These interactions serve several purposes, such as developing oral vocabulary and modeling language or literacy practices. Many different ILAs have been developed to promote literacy and language skills. The following sections discuss current uses of ILAs and review three types of ILAs with a strong research base: teaching songs and rhymes, language facilitation activities, and interactive reading.

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Current Uses of ILAs in Family Literacy

A recent study examined how 19 family literacy programs in Pennsylvania implement the parent-child interactive literacy component of their program (Grinder, et al., 2005). Although the purpose of this

component is to enhance children's language and literacy development, the format and structure of ILAs varies greatly because each program is locally run and developed. Of the 24 family literacy sites (representing 19 programs) included in the study, only 33% of respondents mentioned literacy as one of the purposes of parent-child interactive literacy. Instead, the majority of respondents identified purposes relating to enhanced social development and family relationships. Furthermore, no respondent mentioned the use of scientifically-based reading research to design interactions that facilitate literacy development. The authors concluded, "...family literacy administrators and staff can increase their understanding that the parent-child interactive literacy component can play a crucial role by focusing on children's language and literacy development rather than merely on play and on parenting skills" (p. 26). It is the goal of this review to assist in that process.

Examples of Research-Based ILAs

Teaching Songs and Rhymes

When people think of literacy, they often think of written language. However, oral language is also an important component of literacy. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, 2006), oral language and literacy are interrelated skills. Oral language experiences, in fact, lay the foundation for literacy skills later in life (Butler, et al., 1985; Spira, Bracken, & Fischel, 2005). For example, children with speech-language impairments often have difficulties reading as well (Catts, 1993). Early awareness of rhyming has been shown to enhance literacy acquisition (Goswami, 2001). Specifically, oral language activities such as singing and rhyming are an effective, fun way to develop phonemic awareness skills — the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds of spoken language (Dugan, Brancato, & Smrekar, 2004). These skills are important for learning to read. ILAs that focus on songs and rhymes are especially important for younger children, who learn to use language by hearing it used in multiple ways. As such, teaching songs and rhymes is an important activity that can easily be incorporated into family literacy programs and tailored for families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Language Facilitation Activities

Several activities have been developed to facilitate oral language development in children. One such activity, the CAR strategy, was developed by WLS (2005) as part of its evidence-based early literacy program, *Language is Key*. The CAR strategy is a simple mnemonic device that stands for three steps that facilitate conversations between parents and children: Comment, Ask, and Respond. In the

first step, the parent *comments* on what the child is doing, thereby modeling language for the child. Then the parent *asks* the child a question about what he or she is doing. The program recommends using open-ended questions to elicit more language from the child, and giving children ample time (at least five seconds) to respond. Lastly, parents are instructed to *respond* by repeating and elaborating upon what the child says. In this way, parents expose children to different words and model language skills. An example of the CAR strategy is outlined below.

- Comment: “You’re reading a book about bears who are going on a picnic.”
- Ask: “What did the bears bring on the picnic?”
- Respond: “Yes, Mother, Father, and Baby bear brought sandwiches and juice on their picnic.”

The CAR strategy provides a straightforward framework for parents to foster children’s oral language development. However, it is not the only way to foster early language skills. Any activity that exposes children to language and vocabulary can be helpful. For example, ILAs can provide parents with guidance in teaching children vocabulary of daily activities while driving, riding the bus, grocery shopping, or playing at a park. These activities promote reciprocal exchanges and provide opportunities for parents to model language and language behaviors to children.

Interactive Reading

Research supports the idea that adult-child interaction is essential in child literacy learning. For instance, a synthesis of research studies showed that interactive reading had a much greater effect on print-related skills than did shared reading (Trivette & Dunst, 2007). During shared reading sessions, a parent or caregiver reads to a child without inviting him or her to interact or respond verbally. Thus, ILAs can provide parents with ideas and practice in interacting with children during reading, for example, by asking questions or commenting on children’s responses. Educators can assist in encouraging these types of interactions, while also equipping parents to read in ways that are both pleasurable and culturally appropriate—for example, by using relevant, familiar texts such as *fotonovelas* (a popular Latin American text that resembles a comic book), magazines, or storybooks (Janes & Kermani, 2001).

Of all ILAs, interactive reading has the strongest research base. It promotes a variety of skills, including expressive language development (the language a child can say or write), vocabulary, compre-

hension, and motivation for reading (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; De Temple & Snow, 2003; Karrass & Braungart-Rieker, 2005; Sénéchal et al., 2008). Interactive reading also exposes children to the conventions of written language such as grammar (Bus, et al., 1995). Interactive reading serves several purposes, including “prompting children’s active involvement in constructing an understanding of a book’s meaning by making inferences, drawing conclusions, and making predictions” (DeBruin-Parecki, 2007, p. 7). Thus, during interactive reading sessions, parents are encouraged to:

- ask questions about the story,
- relate the story to the child’s life,
- monitor the child’s understanding of the story,
- encourage the child to make predictions,
- make the shared reading a positive experience (for example, by reading with emotion or letting the child choose the book), and
- praise the child (DeBruin-Parecki, 2007).

Asking children questions about the story increases their comprehension of the text and helps caregivers assess the child’s understanding. Similarly, relating the story to the child’s life facilitates comprehension while also engaging the child in the reading experience. Asking children to predict events in a story helps bolster imagination and critical thinking skills. Finally, the reading experience must be positive and reinforcing, thus capturing the child’s interest and promoting his or her desire to read.

Through interactive reading, children also learn the process of reading, or print awareness, which includes knowledge of how to hold a book, how to turn pages one at a time, how to read lines from left to right, and understanding that the printed words are the words that are read (see Israel, 2007, for a review of literature). Parents can teach their children these skills during interactive reading sessions. For example, parents can follow along with their finger when reading to demonstrate how to read words and lines in order from left to right. This is especially important for young readers who are unfamiliar with the process of reading.. Learning print awareness skills is a developmentally appropriate way for young children to participate in ILAs. For very young children, the process outlined by DeBruin-Parecki (2007) should be adapted to make it developmentally appropriate. For example, when reading with younger children, caregivers can show, explain, and describe pictures in books. When incorporating interactive reading activities in family literacy programs, educators should consider how best to support parents in

practicing them at home. Recommendations include considering resources within the home, such as availability of printed materials, time, and space; fostering children's motivation to read by tailoring the experience to their interests; and encouraging interactive reading activities that promote positive relationships between parents and children (Conrad, 2008).

Cultural Considerations

Considerations regarding cultural diversity are also important in designing ILAs. Although much of the research on ILAs and, more broadly, parental involvement in literacy, has focused on white families, recent research has also examined home literacy practices of culturally diverse families. For example, a study of Latino immigrant families' uses of literacy at home revealed that parents used "school-related literacy activities" such dialogic reading strategies "when they believed it would best help their children to succeed academically" (Perry, Kay, & Brown, 2008, n.p.). Parents also tailored literacy activities to reflect their cultural beliefs, for example, by involving siblings in literacy activities. Overall, the Latino parents tended to emphasize "pleasure and interactivity" in ILAs, use scaffolding strategies (such as observation, prompting, and demonstration), impart "moral messages" to children during ILAs, and encourage bilingual literacy opportunities. As discussed below, this preliminary research suggests that interactive reading is a culturally based activity.

Educators must strive to ensure that the literacy and parent-child interaction strategies taught during ILAs are appealing and appropriate for culturally diverse families. For instance, a family literacy program in California had little success in teaching Latino caregivers, many of them immigrants, how to use questioning strategies (e.g., What is this? What do you think will happen next?) during storybook reading with their children (Janes & Kermani, 2001). This reading style was uncomfortable and stressful for both children and caregivers. They, like many other immigrant families, were unfamiliar with the U.S. practice of reading children's storybooks. Also, within their cultural framework, children were expected to "listen and observe" rather than to "initiate topics of talk" (p. 464). However, when the educators decided that caregivers would write, illustrate, and read their own storybooks to children, "literacy became a joyful and interactive experience" (p. 464) because it reflected the families' cultural style of communication and beliefs about appropriate parent-child interactions.

This example illustrates the importance of adapting ILAs to suit families of different ethnicities and nationalities, especially by build-

ing on the ways they already use literacy and oral communication (e.g., Brooks, et al., 2008; Carter, Chard, & Pool, 2009; Hammer, et al., 2005; Heath, 1983; Johnston & Wong, 2002). Great care must be taken not to promote one way of reading, writing, talking, or using print, such as storybook reading, as the only or best way to cultivate children's language and literacy development (Anderson, et al., 2003).

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The following guidelines, adapted from Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis (2005), can assist family literacy professionals in designing culturally appropriate ILAs.

- Use "parent surveys, individual interviews, focus groups, and home observations" to learn about "parental perceptions and expectations on the uses and functions for literacy in their lives" (p. 116), and then use this information to plan ILAs. Questions for parents could explore topics such as the language in which they prefer to read, the types of materials they enjoy reading, how comfortable they feel reading to children, "their goals for sharing literacy activities with their children," and the ways in which "parents contribute to developing early reading skills" (p. 116).
- Use a wide array of reading materials such as "poetry, theater, biography, autobiography, history, and contemporary fiction and fantasy" (p. 116). Include multicultural literature and literacy activities.
- Strive to integrate "parents' diverse approaches to literacy acquisition" (p. 116) into ILAs, while also helping them expand the ways they use literacy and language with their children.
- Encourage parents who struggle with print literacy in English and/or in their native language to "engage [children] in rhymes, songs, riddles, oral history, poetry, proverbs, and folklore" (p. 117) and to use wordless picture books.
- Involve extended family members such as grandparents, siblings, godparents, and aunts and uncles in ILAs.
- Build ILAs on the interests of parents and children, "such as hobbies, sports, and celebrated cultural events" (p. 118), meaningful photographs, and their activities in their community.

Conclusion

Parent-child programs should focus on a range of interactive activities beyond shared reading experiences (Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006). Thus, it is important to consider all facets of ILAs and use an integrated approach by combining various activities that promote language and literacy development. For example, WLS (2005) has developed ILAs for children who are newborns through age three. These ILAs focus on developmentally appropriate activities designed to facilitate language development, sounds and rhymes, and general book and print awareness, thus combining various oral language and print activities and developing a well-rounded ILA program. For preschool-aged children, WLS has also developed ILAs that facilitate language development, phonological awareness (an understanding of the sounds of spoken language), and general print awareness. A further advantage is that the ILAs provided by WLS are available in both Spanish and English. This is only one example of a variety of free resources that are available to help facilitate the use of ILAs in family literacy.

In summary, it is essential to make ILAs developmentally and culturally appropriate for children and to use an approach that integrates various activities in order to foster literacy and language development. Family literacy programs should incorporate explicit training for parents and provide opportunities for practice and feedback. With the proper supports, parents can play an important role in nurturing their children's oral language and literacy abilities and their love of learning.

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ILA Resources

- Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy: Annotated Bibliography (Parent and Child Interactive Literacy)
http://www.ed.psu.edu/goodlinginstitute/pdf/Search_Topic_A.pdf
- Harvard Family Research Project
<http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/storybook-corner>
- LINCS Family Literacy Practitioners Resources
http://literacy.kent.edu/Midwest/FamilyLit/pract_pact.html
- Literacy CyberSpace
<http://literacy.nwfsc.edu/famlit/parents/ILA/index.htm>
<http://literacy.nwfsc.edu/famlit/parents/ILA/literacy.htm>
- Reading Rockets
<http://www.readingrockets.org/>
- Texas Family Literacy Resource Center
<http://www.tei.education.txstate.edu/famlit/ILA/ila.htm>